



## Coming to Terms with Color

William Johnson

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 WILLIAM JOHNSON

## Coming to Terms with Color

"GLORIOUS TECHNICOLOR!" (typical movie ad, 1940's)

"Glorious Technicolor!" (typical term of critical irony, 1940's)

"*Shocking Eastmancolor!*" (nudie theater poster, 1960's)

"I have rarely seen such a blaze of irrelevant color." (Kenneth Tynan on *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*)

"One of the most breathtakingly lovely films ever made." (*Life* on *Red Desert*)

"*Red Desert* only confirms my feeling that color is a drawback." (Arne Sucksdorff)

"... these blear'd eyes

*Have waked to read your several colours, sir,  
Of the pale citron, the green lion, the crow,  
The peacock's tail, the plumed swan."*

(Ben Jonson, *THE ALCHEMIST*)

Ever since the modern alchemists learned how to transmute different wavelengths of light into a film image composed of equivalent dyes, there has been wide disagreement about the role of color on the screen. Until the early 1950's, the chief disagreement was between the public—which generally flocked to color movies—and the critics—who generally dismissed color movies as garish, pretty-pretty, or otherwise inartistic. During that period, of course, only a handful of critically respectable directors—Ford, Hitch-

cock, Olivier, among others—had made films in color.<sup>1</sup>

But in the past decade or so the picture has changed. Not only has the proportion of color films increased—overwhelmingly so in America—but the number of critically respectable directors who have worked or are working in color may by now form a majority. The list includes Antonioni, Bergman, Buñuel, Chabrol, Chaplin, Demy, Fellini, Godard, Huston, Ichikawa, Kazan, Kozintsev, Kubrick, Kurosawa, Lean, Losey, Malle, Renoir, Resnais, Richardson, Rosi, Truffaut, Varda, Visconti, Wajda, Welles, and Zinnemann, as well as the late Max Ophüls and Ozu. No critic can dismiss this entire group with "glorious Technicolor" irony, or claim that they are all exceptions which prove the rule.

Thus disagreement today about the role of color on the screen arises chiefly among critics when they try to assess the color films of these directors. (The public, of course, no longer flocks to color as in the past; it merely stays away more from black-and-white.) The disagreement stems partly from perplexity. Recent color films have undermined many accepted "facts" about screen color—that it is more realistic than black-and-white (does *Juliet of the Spirits* look more realistic than *8½*?), that it is more sensuous (is *Muriel* more sensuous than *Last Year at Marienbad*?) and that it is slower (does *Help!* move more slowly than *A Hard Day's Night*?). And it isn't easy to discern any

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<sup>1</sup> This article is concerned with the photographed film and not the animated film. The two differ widely both in their approaches to color and in the problems they face, and it would be confusing to deal with them concurrently. Of course, many of the general statements about screen color will also apply to the animated film.

more dependable rules of thumb about color in the recent films. What common denominator does the color have in *Muriel*, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, *Red Desert*, and *Juliet of the Spirits*?<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, in appraising the use of color in these new films, critics have tended to take refuge in generalities, accepting or rejecting the color as a whole.

One obstacle to any deeper study is the sheer elusiveness of screen color. There is no durable record of the flickering images except on the film strip itself. While a black-and-white still can record the form of the screen image accurately enough, a color still is bound to distort the original colors, if only because of the physical difference between a projected image and printed inks. One's memory may be even less reliable: I have clearly "remembered" colors which a re-viewing of the film showed to be nonexistent. For that reason I've limited my examples of screen color to those which I noted while viewing the film; and in most cases I've checked my notes against a further viewing.

A second obstacle to critical study of screen color is the difficulty of attributing credit (or blame). If a director paints the grass, of course, the critics know where they are; but if he doesn't, do they praise the local weather, the photographic lab workers, or who or what? A similar doubt exists about effects in a black-and-white film, but it seems much more acute when the fragile and elusive phenomenon of color is concerned.

Probably the reddest of herrings that confronts a critic examining screen color is the fact that the history of photography runs back to front. If Niépce, Talbot, Daguerre, and the other pioneers of photography had found a chemical that distinguished among different wavelengths of light, they would surely not have rejected it in favor of the silver salts that distinguish only between bright and dark. And in that case, black-and-white would have been the later and more sophisticated development—in both still and movie photography—that it is in the other visual arts. But because color came later, many people saw it as an additive to black-and-white instead of a medium in its own

right. Those in favor of screen color welcomed it for its decorative value; those in opposition condemned it for painting the lily.

This view of screen color as a mere additive was supported by the earliest attempts to introduce color into films. Before the end of the nineteenth century color films were being produced by two methods, both of which consisted of adding color to black-and-white. Some filmmakers almost literally painted the lily by having their films hand-colored, frame by frame. The far more widespread and longer-lived method was to tint the film, bathing entire scenes in a single color. Often the tinting was little more than functional: yellow for sunlight, blue for night. Sometimes it was used for dramatic or expressionistic effects, like the red-tinted shot of gleaming swords, expressing the husband's violent jealousy, in Arthur Robison's *Warning Shadows*. Sometimes the functional and dramatic uses were combined, as in the impressive red-tinted night scene of Babylon under attack by fire in Griffith's *Intolerance*. While tinting was more esthetic—and certainly more practical—than hand coloring, its expressive possibilities were obviously limited by the fact that everything in a scene had to be the same color.

Attempts to record "natural" color on film date back more than half a century. But the earliest successful color film process was three-strip Technicolor,<sup>2</sup> first used for a feature in 1935 (Mamoulian's *Becky Sharp*). This process dominated color film-making until the early 1950's.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Three-strip Technicolor in effect breaks down every tone into a combination of three primary colors, which are recorded on three different strips of film. An earlier version of Technicolor used only two strips and two primaries: a number of films were made with this process in the 1920's and early 1930's.

<sup>3</sup> The second successful color process was Agfa-color, developed in Germany during World War II and subsequently taken over by the Russians. It too used a three-primary system but combined the three color layers on a single strip of film.

Naturally, the standard of success in the quest for a color film process was the ability to reproduce colors as closely as possible. There is an analogy here with painting, since art students must usually learn to imitate nature before achieving independence. But the prentice years of color film-making dragged on and on, occupying a longer stretch of the cinema's short history than the prentice years of sound or the wide screen.

One reason was technical. Since color was *not* an addition (like sound) or a simple modification (like the wide screen), the color images had to be clear and legible or the whole movie would collapse. Technicolor was a less flexible medium than the black-and-white films that directors were used to: it was slower (that is, it needed brighter lighting) and it had a narrower latitude (shadow areas were more liable to black out and highlighted areas were more liable to white out). In addition, color was relatively more expensive than it has become since. So directors were not encouraged to take chances.

Indeed, they were actively *discouraged*. The Technicolor Corporation exercised tight control over the way its film was used. The earlier two-strip film had been widely condemned as crude and garish, which the Corporation blamed largely on the film-makers' choice of colors. So now the Corporation insisted on leasing (not selling) the special cameras required, on doing all the developing and printing and—most important of all—on supervising the choice of colors for sets, costumes, and so on. Technicolor was anxious to display the range and subtlety—indeed, the *ungarishness*—of its process. But in so doing it fell into a different trap: too many of the early color films contain scene after scene of finely modulated, tasteful, and utterly cloying harmonies. A typical example is Norman Taurog's *Words and Music* (1948), whose interiors are a genteel riot of beiges, oaks, olives, lavenders, and other modest shades. Not surprisingly, some of the most exciting color effects in any Technicolor film occurred in Huston's *Moulin Rouge* (1953), which broke the Corporation's ban on using filters.

By the time *Moulin Rouge* was made, however, Technicolor's preëminence in the Western world was being challenged by several new color film processes, of which by far the most important was—and is—Eastmancolor.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Technicolor, Eastmancolor could be used in a conventional camera, and Eastman Kodak did not impose control on either its use or its developing and printing.<sup>5</sup> Before long, Technicolor was dethroned.

At first, films made with Eastmancolor were generally inferior in color quality to those made with Technicolor. Hitchcock's *To Catch a Thief*, which was made with Eastmancolor in 1954—and won an Oscar for its color photography—contains scenes of the Riviera which are coarse and unpleasing compared to the delicately nuanced Riviera scenes in Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes*, made with Technicolor in 1948. Of course, Eastmancolor was a new product, starting from scratch, and the absence of any central control over the prints meant that they could fall far short of the film's capabilities. It took years of improvements in Eastmancolor itself and in the processing of it to raise the color-recording quality of the general run of color movies to the late-1940's level.

This may partly account for the fact that few film-makers in the 1950's made imaginative use of the freedom which Eastmancolor brought them. The earliest and almost lone exception was Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell* (1953).<sup>6</sup> In general, the old habits of decorative color persisted—and still persist in many film-makers today. Fussily

<sup>4</sup> All the new processes used a single-strip, three-color system. Today by far the greatest number of color films produced outside the Communist countries are made with Eastmancolor.

<sup>5</sup> Eastmancolor goes under many different names according to the studio or laboratory that controls the developing and printing, e.g., Metrocolor, De Luxe, and Technicolor (which still thrives on its distinctive printing process).

<sup>6</sup> I have not seen the film again since it first appeared, but if my memory is at all accurate there was a sharp break with the "tradition" of lush landscapes and multi-tinted interiors, and different sequences were keyed to dominant tones.

## COLOR

conceived harmonies, "tasteful" to the point of nausea, abound even in colorful-sounding films like *The Pleasure Seekers* or *How To Murder Your Wife*.

One spur to a freer use of color was the spread of location shooting. Even the glossiest Hollywood production, like a high fashion model revealing a human blemish, admitted to scenes with heavy shadows, silhouettes, twilight, real mist, and other "imperfect" lighting conditions. Theoretically, of course, these conditions led to increased naturalism; but in fact they presented audiences with unfamiliar, somewhat distorted color effects (as I shall explain later). The unreality of such "naturalism" becomes obvious in films like *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and Godard's *Contempt*, in which daylight areas are included in scenes filmed in artificial light and thus appear an unearthly blue.<sup>7</sup>

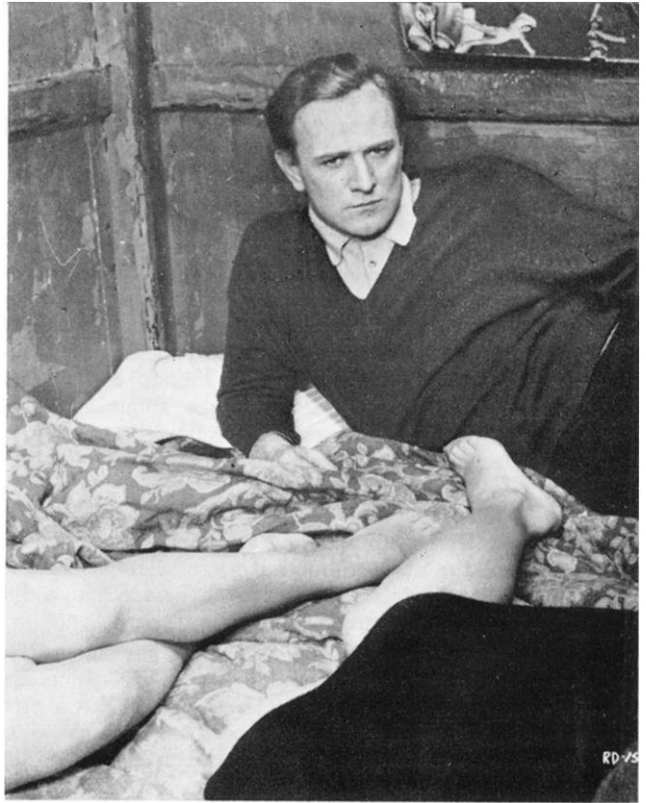
Meanwhile, the extra cost of using color rather than black-and-white was no longer big enough to exclude directors with modest-sized budgets and audiences. The important thing was not that these directors used color well (which many did not: Baratier's *La Poupée* was messy, Malle's *Zazie* incoherent, Bergman's *All These Women* insipid, among others)—but that they used color primarily because they wanted to, not because they would suffer at the box office with black-and-white.

Ever since the first Technicolor film, some directors had tried to do more with color than soothe or dazzle the eye.<sup>8</sup> But only in the 1960's did that "some" become "many."

What exactly are these directors trying to do? To answer this with any clarity, I must first deal (as briefly as possible) with three more basic questions:

1. How do colors affect us in real life?
2. How do colors affect us aesthetically?
3. How do colors affect us on the screen, where esthetic experience and a representation of real life are combined?

1. Unlike shape or mass or even sound, color is not an attribute of the object;<sup>9</sup> it is a subjective experience. Color is the brain's response



Antonioni's RED DESERT

to a particular wavelength of light emitted, reflected, or refracted by the object.

For physical and physiological reasons, colors form complementaries, contrasts, harmonies, and clashes. That is, colors interact to enhance or diminish one another's effectiveness, with results that strike the viewer as more or less pleasing.

<sup>7</sup> The eye adapts easily to the difference between bluish daylight and yellowish tungsten light, but film cannot.

<sup>8</sup> I have not seen *Becky Sharp*, but according to statements made by Mamoulian he attempted to use color symbolically and dramatically in certain scenes.

<sup>9</sup> If grass, for example, could be said to possess a color, it would be a combination of everything in the spectrum *except* green, which is the one color that grass does not absorb.

Colors stimulate various psychological responses. Many attempts have been made to codify these responses, and the dicta of color engineers and theoreticians today exert a considerable influence in fields ranging from fashion to packaging. But, as a recent survey of color<sup>10</sup> points out, there has so far been very little *scientific* investigation of human response to color. There is some doubt about even the simplest responses. For example, red is generally considered an "advancing" color and blue a "receding" color, the physical reason being that these wavelengths of light are refracted differently by the eye's lens and do not focus at the same point; but some scientists believe that a bright color "advances" more than a dim one irrespective of hue.<sup>11</sup>

One series of scientific tests has shown that the color adults tend to like best is blue, the one they tend to like least, yellow. But a preference expressed about swatches of single colors displayed against a neutral background has little bearing on the interplay of colors in real life—or else few women would ever wear yellow.

Emotional responses to particular colors in real life probably depend to a great extent on associations. Thus red is felt to be warm and blue to be cool because of the associations with fire and blood on the one hand, water and ice on the other. But such responses don't necessarily work in the abstract, and may not work at all if the colors are attached to objects with associations of their own. Green may be restful so long as it can conceivably be associated with summer foliage, but not if it suggests moldy bread or Ben Jonson's lion!

2. All the visual arts which involve color make use of the relationships and associations described above. Although architecture and sculpture do not usually involve so much variety of color as the stage arts and, above all, painting, the artist in every one of these media has an extremely free choice of colors and modes of using them. Even in a strictly representational painting, the artist can modify the color of any or every object within wide limits.

The painter's control over his color effects

can be very precise indeed. He can choose colors solely for their harmonies, solely for their expressionistic value, or in varying combinations of the two modes. At the same time, he can determine the strength of any color associations by the degree of realism in his painting. Thus certain colors in an Op Art painting may evoke virtually no associations; the same colors in an abstract expressionist painting, in which forms are on the threshold of recognizability, may evoke an emotional response through the association of color with form; while the same colors in a Pop Art painting may evoke an entirely different emotional response because they are *not* usually associated with the all-too-recognizable forms.

3. The film-maker is in an equivocal position. On the one hand, he can exercise a much wider control over the colors in his film than many people realize. As far as interiors are concerned, the colors of virtually everything that appears in front of the camera—sets, costumes, props, make-up—may be chosen or modified at will.<sup>12</sup> This control is readily recognized in Hollywood musicals, especially in set pieces which are colored with a nonrealistic palette—the dream sequence in *Singin' in the Rain*, where Cyd Charisse's long white gauzy stole floats against a surrealistic, lavender-lighted void, or the Mickey Spillane spoof in Minnelli's *Band Wagon*, which metamorphoses a New York subway station into pale clinical green, a bar into misty pink and powder blue, and so on.

But it's a mistake to assume that creative screen color must begin and end with fantasy. In natural exteriors, the film-maker can still choose the settings—and therefore the colors—

<sup>10</sup> *Color: A Guide to Basic Facts and Concepts*, by Robert W. Burnham, Randall M. Hanes and C. James Bartelson (Wiley, 1963)

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> I'm not suggesting that such complete control is the general rule. Budget considerations will often preclude much trial and error. And in any case, the film-maker (director or producer) may not be interested in exercising his freedom of choice, which may be delegated partly to someone else and partly to happenstance.

he wants. Whether Terence Young knew it or not, filming parts of *Thunderball* under water was just as much a choice of blue-green tones as Roger Corman's deliberate blue-green tinting of the dream sequence in *The Premature Burial*.

The film-maker can also control the colors of an exterior scene by deciding what season of the year, what time of day and what weather conditions to shoot in. For both exteriors and interiors he can exercise still further control by means of lighting, exposure, filters, and adjustments in printing the film.

Perhaps the most important—and most easily overlooked—of all the film-maker's tools for controlling color is the camera itself. By changing the camera angle the film-maker can include or exclude a particular color in the setting. By moving the camera back for a long shot or forward for a close-up he can minimize or emphasize a particular color in the scene—just as Hitchcock keeps us detached from the mysterious spots of red that disturb Marnie until the dénouement, when he moves in for a screen-filling close-up of blood.

So the film-maker does have considerable control over color; but on the other hand, it is impossible for him to determine all the colors in a scene independently of one another, as a painter can. Unlike a painting, the screen image is not completely autonomous but is linked closely to the objects filmed. Except in the extreme case of *trompe-l'oeil*, a painting is seen and accepted as a two-dimensional image, distinct from reality; but a film is seen partly, perhaps chiefly, as a window on a three-dimensional reality "behind the screen." Thus a green lion in an otherwise representational painting may be mystifying, but the spectator doesn't seek a *physical* explanation for its greenness. On the screen, however, a green lion in an otherwise realistic setting is automatically set apart, since the viewer consciously or unconsciously wonders *how* the lion is made green as well as *why*. He expects screen colors to obey the same rules of cause and effect as in real life.

Yet in spite of this, screen colors *always appear different from reality*. For one thing,

they almost certainly *are* different to a slight degree, because of the nature of the film process.<sup>13</sup> More important is the equivocal nature of the screen image: although the viewer sees it primarily as a representation of real objects, it is also an object in its own right—an object unified by its isolation amid darkness and by its dependence on a single light source, the projector.

In real life one's perceptual mechanism takes all sorts of liberties with colors. Often it tones them down: one doesn't normally much notice colors unless they are unfamiliar or unexpected. Even colors that must be noticed—functional colors like traffic lights—are seen in a generalized way: one doesn't observe whether the red tends to orange or crimson, or the green to lemon or turquoise, one simply registers red and green. At other times the brain changes the colors reported by the eyes, or even creates colors where none are reported. For example, an object will take on different colors in daylight, lamplight, sunlight filtering through foliage, etc., but the brain sees it as its "normal" color at nearly all times. Moreover, the brain grasps a black-and-white image of a familiar object as if it were in color; so that even with an effort of will it is almost impossible to see a black-and-white portrait as a faithful record of an ashen face! In real life, one generally sees the colors one expects to see.

But the color film offers no scope for this subjective vision. The brightness and isolation of the screen image compel attention; and because the image is a single object it compels observation of all the colors on the same terms. In short, the viewer is made to see specific colors which differ from those he's accustomed to seeing.

By objectifying the deeply subjective experience of color vision, the color film can work

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<sup>13</sup> Color film contains the equivalent of three layers of black-and-white film, which record the amount of red, blue and green in each object color. In the final print, the monochromatic tones in each layer are replaced by red, blue and green dyes. Thus there is only the most indirect relationship between object colors and print colors.

for (or against) the film-maker in three broad areas:

*Color sharpens the viewer's perception of the screen image—or, more simply, it brings out details.*

Explaining how *Neighbours* was made, Norman McLaren says:<sup>14</sup> "We selected color: there was going to be speeded-up action and moments of very fast cutting, and I think it's possible to sort out an image more quickly, grasp it sooner in color than black-and-white, especially if the image is at all complex and the movement fast."

Obviously there can be a greater variety of visual contrasts among colors than among gradations of black-and-white. This is a functional effect—but it can also enhance any emotional or dramatic content in the film. In Aleksander Ford's *Five From Barska Street*, for example, there are several long shots of the heroine playing a kind of hide-and-seek with her boyfriend at dusk amid the ruins of Warsaw, and her gleaming blond hair stands out vividly, even at a distance, against the predominantly bluish surroundings. The visual contrast, keener than anything possible in black-and-white, heightens the emotional contrast between love and destruction.

But color is not a wonder detergent, making every script situation automatically more sparkling than with Brand X. In *Five From Barska Street*, the girl's hair is one bright spot against a background of near-complementary tones. In *Neighbours*, the setting—grass and shrubbery—forms an almost uniformly green background which contrasts well both with the warmish colors of the neighbors and with the white of their "houses." If a film-maker lets his colors get out of hand, the accumulation of detail may lead not to clarity but to confusion. There's a striking example in Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis*—striking because the use of color in this film is otherwise careful and imaginative. But the color literally falls to pieces in the ballroom scenes toward the end, where the variegated dresses of the dancers and the Christmassy decor collapse into a formless jumble.

The ability of color to emphasize detail car-

ries with it another disadvantage: fakery of any kind is far more obvious and jarring than in black-and-white. Painted backcloths and models do not have the minuteness of detail that color film can reveal in landscapes or large-scale objects; in back-projection or process shots, the colors in one part of the image may be in a different key from those elsewhere.

Most of the earlier color films escaped the worst of these flaws because they were either action pictures shot outdoors or frankly artificial musicals. But directors who turned to color after many years of working with black-and-white often did not allow for this difference—hence the glaring fabrications in Hitchcock's color films, the poor process shots in Wyler's *Ben-Hur*, and the ill-fitting patchwork of such DeMille stunts as the parting of the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* and the collapse of the temple in *Samson and Delilah*.

*In watching a color film, the viewer has a heightened awareness not only of details but of colorfulness in general.*

This probably accounts for the fact that many people found the early Technicolor films garish. (Some films actually were garish, of course, but far more were bland.) Viewers were simply not accustomed to seeing colors as the objective screen image compelled them to. Now that audiences *have* become so accustomed, the blanket charge of garishness is rare—even though recent films like *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *Juliet of the Spirits* use bright colors far more freely than almost any film of the Technicolor era.

Instead of balking at this heightened awareness of colors, many viewers reveled in it for its own sake. And if theater managers are to be believed,<sup>15</sup> a majority of moviegoers in America today look upon color as a decorative wrapping that adds pleasure to any film.

A film-maker who doesn't want his colors to be taken for mere decoration can of course

<sup>14</sup> In an interview reported in *Film: Book Two*, ed. Robert Hughes (Grove, 1963).

<sup>15</sup> See the exhibitors' comments in almost any issue of *Box Office*.



Fellini's  
GIULIETTA  
DEGLI  
SPIRITI



tone them down. One of the most rigorous examples of toning-down is *Red Desert*: in most scenes Antonioni chooses settings and lighting conditions which make all colors tend toward gray. A milder case is *The Bible*, in which Huston carefully avoids any chromatic resemblance to other films based on the same book.

But it would be self-defeating to try to eliminate all sensuous color—even Antonioni doesn't try that. It would certainly be out of character for a musical not to make some of its colors as sensuous as possible—like the stunning set, all of luminous rose madder, in the Mickey Spillane spoof in *Band Wagon*. And recently there have been successful attempts to use sensuous color as a dramatic foundation of the entire film. I shall have more to say about this later, in discussing *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *Le Bonheur*.

*The viewer responds more keenly to specific colors on the screen than in real life.*

Let's look deeper into the case of the "rest-

ful green." In real life people are of course well aware of the difference between a dirty olive and a brilliant chartreuse, and wouldn't insist that either is restful; but within these extremes they tend not to notice a particular shade of green (or any other hue) unless compelled to in some way (e.g., by being in a room decorated entirely in that shade). Normally they can just look away. But the hypnotic screen image, filled with objectified, not-quite-familiar colors, forces them to see the specific shade of green, its relationship to other specific colors around it, and its relevance (if any) to the dramatic context.

Under these conditions a green *may* still be restful, as in Resnais' *Muriel*: the foliage seen through the window when Hélène visits her quiet acquaintances, Antoine and Angèle, suits this haven of contentment. But green may also be:

Oppressive—Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*: the dark green of the large window curtain

behind which the would-be murderer is to hide.

Nauseating—*Red Desert*: the blotchy wall cut in after Giuliana reluctantly submits to her husband's embrace.

Nostalgic—*Rosì's Moment of Truth*: the ochreous greens of olive trees and fields when Miguelin revisits his home village.

Stimulating—*Singin' in the Rain*: the sleek lime-green dress worn by Cyd Charisse for her first dance number.

Tense—Fritz Lang's *Rancho Notorious*: the bright pea-green lampshade in the sheriff's office when Arthur Kennedy and Mel Ferrer make their jailbreak—green for danger!

For all I know, none of these color effects was intentional. In any case, I'm certainly not implying that each shade of green denotes the corresponding state of mind. Working through the relationships and associations described earlier, the color acts as a kind of servo-mechanism, amplifying a mood that would still exist without color. The "green for danger" effect in *Rancho Notorious*, for example, derives partly from the fact that the green is an eye-catching tone (by far the purest and brightest color in the scene) and partly from the viewer's realization that its light might expose the jailbreakers. If the scene were in black-and-white, the mere brightness of the lamp would convey some of the tension. Just as the greater visual range of colors can make details more legible than in black-and-white, so it can bring out moods and emotional reactions more sharply.

But color is more than a heightened black-and-white, as some less casual examples will show. In *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, color reinforces the mood directly in the scene where Guy decides to ask the quiet Madeleine to marry him. The setting is a sidewalk café painted a brilliant orange—a vibrant color generating a sense of energy and radiance that would be absent from its equivalent in black-and-white.

In the high school commencement scenes in Robson's *Peyton Place*, color reinforces the mood by contrast. Amid the general excitement and optimism, Hope Lange is gloomy at the

thought of her prospects. The cheerful crimson of caps and gowns which dominates the screen forms a striking dissonant setting for her downcast face.

There is a subtler example of this kind of contrast, the coloring of the face being as important as that of the setting, in Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country*. During the wedding ceremony in the saloon-cum-brothel of the mining camp, Elsa's freckled face and golden hair shine out against the darker, viscid colors of the decor. Black-and-white could easily convey the visual contrast between light and dark, but not between the freshness of over-innocence and the staleness of over-experience.

A special form of contrast with no counterpart in black-and-white is the color clash. Usually, of course, the film-maker tries to avoid this effect, regarding it as one of the additional possibilities for error with which he has to pay for the additional expressiveness of color. But it can also be an asset. In the middle episode of Asquith's *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (a film not otherwise distinguished for its use of color) the disarming uncouthness of the gangster's moll (Shirley MacLaine) is neatly suggested by the juxtaposition of her shocking-pink dress and the yellow Rolls itself. And in *The Battle of the Villa Fiorita* Delmer Daves uses a color clash to editorialize on Moira's decision to leave her husband and live with Lorenzo: for a shot of the two relaxing quite innocently in the villa, he arranges the decor and lighting to produce a color scheme of bilious greens and blues.

By far the most common type of contrast is the one that usually occurs in exterior long shots—between the blue of the sky and the generally warmer colors of landscapes or buildings. Whether because of the contrast alone, or because blue recedes and warmer colors advance, such exterior shots tend to give a stronger impression of spaciousness than black-and-white. The color-film maker can modify this sense of spaciousness by shooting in different atmospheric conditions. One example (which may or may not be intentional) occurs in the early scenes of Hathaway's *Nevada*

Smith, when the callow young hero sets out in pursuit of the men who killed his parents: the sky here is a particularly limpid and distant blue, and its extra spaciousness suggests the long way Nevada must go to attain his goal.

The finest use of this outdoor contrast I've ever seen is also one of the earliest. In Henry King's *Jesse James* (1939) the James gang holds up a railroad train at dusk. Jesse leaps onto the train and runs along the top while it is still moving: he is silhouetted against the deepening blue of the sky while the car windows below him glow with orange lamplight. Thanks to the bold silhouetting, which eliminates virtually all colors except those of the sky and the windows, the scene conveys a striking and economical contrast between the cold, dangerous world of the outlaw and the warm, comfortable world of the law-abiding passengers.

All the examples I have cited so far merely scratch the surface of screen color, since they do not involve one of the most important attributes of the film—duration.

A good color film must consist of more than individually effective scenes. Failure to relate color to duration accounts partly for the weakness of Satyajit Ray's first color film, *Kanchenjunga*. While many individual images show a perceptive use of color, the effect is frequently annulled by movement within the scene or by the transition to the following scene. These continual shifts in color keys are particularly unfortunate because the action of the film leaps to and fro among six or seven members of a family: instead of helping the different sections to cohere, the color only increases their dislocation.

Thus a whole new area of possibilities—for good or ill—is opened up by the fact that *all the foregoing effects of screen color work in time as well as space, and tend to work more powerfully in time than in space.*

There are some obvious similarities here between film and stage. In plays, especially costume plays, colors are often chosen for what might be called emblematic purposes, so that the characters are easy to identify when they appear onstage or intermingle with others. The

costumes in Olivier's film of *Henry V* are emblematic in this way: warm reds and golds for the English, cold blues and silvers for the French. The fact that *Henry V* is adapted from a stage play doesn't mean that this kind of color effect is uncinematic. It can also be put to good use in unstagelike films such as Terence Fisher's *Horror of Dracula*, where Dracula's castle and all the vampires appear in bluish tones while the humans are keyed to warm tones. However, the flexibility of the film medium—its power of showing both the wood and the trees, of controlling transitions from one scene to another—enable it to go far beyond the simple use of color to which the stage is largely limited. Indeed, as was implied earlier in the discussion of responses to specific colors, this flexibility even enables the film to override or reverse such emblematic associations. Silver and blue may stand for coldness and lack of vigor in *Henry V*; but in the context of Varda's *Le Bonheur* a silvery statue and a blurred background of silver birches can become lively; and because nearly all the other colors in *Ben-Hur* are drab, the blue scarf that Charlton Heston wears for the chariot race can become vibrant and exciting.

Another stage device for organizing colors in time is to change the lighting. Here again the film is far more flexible, since it can move at will from day to night, sunlight to mist, and into any kind of artificial light. Insofar as these conditions are naturalistic, they are means of controlling color effects rather than effects in themselves, and do not need separate discussion. But artificial lighting on the stage is sometimes emblematic in color, and a few films have borrowed this device.

When the situation as well as the lighting is artificial—as in the ballet sequence of *An American in Paris*—the device can be successful on the screen. But attempts to bathe naturalistic scenes with mood colors—like the rose-tinted scene between the Norman knight and the peasant girl in Schaffner's *The War Lord*, or the variety of pastel-lighted interiors in Bergman's *All These Women*—are unsatisfactory. The mixture of naturalism and artifice in so

basic an element of the image as its lighting is disruptive; and as with our old friend the green lion, the viewer is distracted into wondering about the how as well as the why of the color.<sup>16</sup>

While stage colors can be varied in time but have little flexibility, colors in painting have great flexibility but cannot be varied in time. As Egbert Jackson writes in his book *Basic Color*: "Although discord is often carefully written into music, it is not so common in painting, where there is no time element to resolve it; a color juxtaposition on canvas, once established, remains." For "music" one can read "movies."

Some painters argue that painting does have a time element because the viewer rarely takes in the whole canvas at a glance but lets his eye travel over it. But a painting is not *organized* in time like a film. A series of paintings—such as Monet's studies of Rouen Cathedral—may be very loosely organized in time if hung side by side; but only when a painting becomes the subject of a film can it be fully organized in time. The director then transposes space into time by the use of close-ups, long shots, movements, etc.—or, in a rare instance like Clouzot's *Le Mystère Picasso*, by recording the actual process of creation.

Attempts to return the compliment and give individual film scenes the balanced, finished look of paintings are successful only insofar as they respect the time element—that is, insofar as they fit into the succession of scenes. In *Meet Me in St. Louis* the two older sisters are shown singing at the piano in a scene which, in its composition and soft coloring, calls to mind Renoir's painting *Jeunes Filles au Piano*. The similarity is justified because the scene fits both visually and dramatically with what precedes and follows; otherwise it would stand out as a

mere effect. Ironically, Jean Renoir runs afoul of the time element in *French Cancan*, which he tries to imbue with the sensuousness of his father's paintings by the systematic use of soft, pale pastels; but being repeated in scene after scene this coloring quickly cloyes. Minnelli avoids this trap (if not others!) in *Lust for Life*. Here the colors—predominantly yellow-orange-red-brown-black—are reminiscent of Van Gogh's own vivid sunlight-and-shadow palette; but instead of repeating them totally in scene after scene Minnelli extends them through time. As Van Gogh approaches death, for example, the colors are progressively withdrawn until there is virtually nothing left but the black of the crows and the straw-yellow of the wheatfield in which he dies.

The principle that color effects in time are more telling on the screen than static effects applies just as strongly when there is no allusion to painting. In Corman's *Masque of the Red Death* the demonic scenes in Prince Prospero's sanctum—lighted throughout by the glow of a red window—are far less striking than the sequence in which the victims of the red death swarm around the prince, filling the screen with more and more redness. The relative effectiveness of the two sequences is in no way altered by the fact that the sanctum set is elaborately designed while the climactic red death obviously comes straight out of the make-up box.

All of the color effects described earlier can be developed in time as well as space. For con-

#### Corman's MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH



<sup>16</sup> This article is not meant to be prescriptive. The failure of colored lighting in *The War Lord* and *All These Women* is undoubtedly linked with the fact that these aren't very good films anyway. In a really imaginative film, a similar use of colored lighting—or any other effect termed unsatisfactory in this article—might be fully justified. There is hardly any device that the film *can* use which it cannot occasionally use well.

venience I will discuss the ways of developing them under three broad headings:

1. *A color progression within a scene.* Moving objects are more eye-catching than static ones; moving colored objects, or the movement of the camera among static colored objects, can form the basis of striking color effects.

In Donen's *Funny Face*, when the fashion magazine crew have left the somber bookstore which they invaded to take photos, the young salesgirl finds a hat they overlooked. She begins to sing "How Long Has This Been Going On?" and at the same time slowly unfurls the hat's gauzy chartreuse veil, which gradually brightens up the whole scene with its romantic coloring—a visual equivalent of the romantic awakening of the girl herself.

In *Le Bonheur*, François and his wife are picnicking in a wheatfield when he announces that he has a mistress, assuring her that this does not diminish but increases his marital love. When the wife, submissive, says that she too now loves him more than before, he joyfully stands up and pulls her to her feet. As the camera follows them, the background changes from the pale yellow of the wheat to the luminous green of distant trees. The color change is ambiguous: it takes François' view of his wife's reaction as a joyful cadence, but it also presages the green setting in which she drowns herself.

2. *A color progression from scene to scene.* The climax of *The Masque of the Red Death*, described above, is a simple dramatic example of this. A simple atmospheric example occurs in the scenes of the Seville Holy Week with which *The Moment of Truth* opens: blue-black silhouettes against a pallid dawn sky; then the yellow of lighted candles; and finally the brightly colored processional altar.

There is a subtler use of a color progression in Abram Room's *The Garnet Bracelet*. The action of the film is set in Czarist Russia: the princess Vera is loved from a distance by a government clerk who sends her letters and a bracelet but hopes for nothing in return. In one scene Vera stands pensively in a room furnished richly with reds and mahoganies. In the

next scene the admirer is entering a cellar café whose walls are a pallid green. The extreme change—between complementary colors—obviously suggests the gulf between the princess' circumstances and the clerk's; but Room adds overtones to the contrast by means of the sound track, which leaps from near-silence to a vigorous saltarella played by the café violinist. Thus the green setting creates an impression not only of poverty after luxury but also of liveliness after languor.

An even more complex color progression occurs in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* when Guy makes love to Geneviève for the first and last time. After showing them together in Guy's room, Demy inserts four transitional scenes, each cut in rhythmically on a beat of music, which on the surface merely indicate Geneviève's homeward journey. But the scenes do more than that. Each is keyed to different colors—the rather sickly green of the entrance to Guy's apartment building; the crimson, pink and yellow of a poster across the street; the blue light in which the street itself is bathed; the pale green and pink of the striped wallpaper in Geneviève's living room—and these rapid contrasts mark out Geneviève's inner journey through a turmoil of emotions until, at the end of the fourth scene, she buries her head in her mother's lap.<sup>17</sup>

This kind of transition is made even more abstract by Agnes Varda (Demy's wife) in *Le Bonheur*. Taken out of context, her rapidly cut sequences of colored façades, sunsets, and colored fadeouts might seem to consist of manner without matter. I will discuss their context later; I mention them here as a reminder that a good color film does not present a simple series of color effects but an intricate skein, and even an entire sequence may make little sense if the rest of the film is ignored. That's why the third basic way of developing colors in time, namely

3. *A combination of color progression within a scene and from scene to scene* is necessarily a

<sup>17</sup> It's also possible to react to the sequence as suggesting stages of the love-making itself.

catchall. Endless variations are possible, and it would be ludicrous to try to offer even a representative sample. One example is enough to show how screen colors can enhance a film by ramifying and intertwining through time.

In the first episode of Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* the ambitious samurai leaves his humble weaver wife and marries a well-connected but selfish woman. The newly married couple wander around a street market, where the wife sees a roll of blue-violet fabric that seizes her fancy. She picks it up, almost embracing it, and the sight of this reminds the samurai of his first wife at her loom. Time passes, and the marriage deteriorates. One afternoon as the samurai is taking a nap his wife comes into his room wearing a dress made of the blue-violet fabric, which looks more somber in the shuttered half-light. Irritated by his sleeping, the wife wakes him by slapping his face with her fan, and they quarrel. As the wife turns to storm out, there is a brief flash of white from the petticoat beneath her dress. Here, the change in the appearance of the blue-violet fabric between the two scenes reflects the change in the marriage; and the sharp flash of white amid darker tones creates a visual sensation of bitterness.

In my attempts to describe complex uses of color as succinctly as possible I may seem to have implied that a specific color can have a specific absolute meaning. Let me repeat that the context is all-important. As Eisenstein writes in *Film Sense*: "In general the 'psychological' interpretation of color is a very slippery business. . . . In art it is not the *absolute* relationships [associations] that are decisive, but those *arbitrary* relationships within a system of images dictated by the particular work of art."

In considering particular works of screen art in their entirety, it's easiest to begin with the most elementary form of color system—the insertion of a brief color passage into an otherwise black-and-white film. The 1925 *Phantom of the Opera* and Lewin's *Picture of Dorian Gray* reserve color for their dramatic peaks: the unmasking of the Phantom in the former, the portrait and the corrupted corpse of Dorian in the latter.<sup>18</sup> The "arbitrary relationship" here

is a simple one between black-and-white on the one hand and the totality of the colors on the other—a stark contrast in which the *individual* colors play an unimportant role.

These examples are crude but successful. The device of interpolating color into a black-and-white film originated at a time when the available film processes were themselves crude, since it set them off to best advantage. Yet even today, when film processes have evolved from Eliza Doolittles into *My Fair Ladies*, color and black-and-white are still used together from time to time.

Ironically, the contrast that enhanced the crude color of the 1920's can easily degrade the subtle color of today. It depends largely on whether black-and-white or color dominates the film. In all the examples I can think of which follow the *Phantom of the Opera* practice, the injection of color has a melodramatic and strident effect. This is true even of a documentary like Joris Ivens' *A Valparaiso*, which leaps into color for an impression of the Valparaيسانos' streak of violence. While the sequence is obviously intended to contain some melodrama, color amplifies it out of all proportion: it is much as if Segovia's guitar were suddenly electrified in mid-performance.

On the other hand, there's nothing inherently melodramatic about injecting black-and-white scenes into a color film, and nearly all the examples I can think of are subtle and effective.<sup>19</sup> A survey of a few of these examples will show how color and black-and-white can set each other off to both visual and dramatic advantage.

The role of black-and-white in *Meet Me in St. Louis* is brief but typical. The film is divided into sections according to the season of the year, and each section is preceded by an album-style black-and-white still picture of the Smiths' house at that particular season. The still then

<sup>18</sup> These color scenes were in the early two-strip Technicolor. The prints I have seen are entirely in black-and-white, and I don't know whether any survive with the original color.

<sup>19</sup> The one exception is Vadim's *Blood and Roses*, and here the black-and-white scenes have color running into them.

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comes to life in color. These touches of black-and-white add poignancy to the film's gentle nostalgia, reminding the viewer that the action he is watching is set in a past which has long since been fixed and drained of color. He is all the more delighted when, in a casual cinematic miracle, color and movement return and the past is resurrected.

Black-and-white can add poignancy even to a color film as ungente as *Peeping Tom*—the story of a photographer who kills women with a sharpened tripod leg because, as a child, he was used by his psychologist father as a guinea pig for the study of fear. If Michael Powell had followed the *Phantom of the Opera* practice in this film, reserving color for the killings and leaving the rest in black-and-white, the film would probably have been as melodramatic as my brief description makes it sound. Instead, everything is in color except the films projected by Mark Lewis: those taken of Mark as a child by his father, and those taken by Mark himself while killing. The former are poignant because they juxtapose the doomed innocence of the past with the terrible experience of the present. At one point, for example, the black-and-white film-within-the-film shows the father giving Mark his first movie camera; the scene is interrupted by a brief color shot, in the film's present, of the same camera perched on a shelf above Mark and his projector. Like a spark leaping between electrodes, this alternation of black-and-white and color lights up the gap between a wonderful novelty and the deadly obsession to which it led. When Mark screens his own films, the sharply delineated black-and-white frame within the color frame rivets the viewer's attention like Mark's, and the viewer shares Mark's disappointment that the image of each killing (black-and-white) falls short of the "actuality" (color). Here too black-and-white represents the past—though a much more recent one—and underlines the fact that Mark is too deeply enmeshed in the past to be able to grasp the present. All in all, the use of black-and-white helps to make the viewer sympathize with Mark, and thus to elevate the film from grand guignol into something approaching tragedy.



Michael Powell's *PEEPING TOM*

Perhaps the simplest and most powerful use of the contrast between black-and-white and color is in *Night and Fog*, Resnais' documentary about a Nazi concentration camp. Here there is a complete reversal of the *Phantom of the Opera* practice. Black-and-white is used for the flashbacks of the horrors of the camp during the war and at its liberation;<sup>20</sup> while color is used for the postwar views of the camp, now in ruins and overgrown with weeds, and looking serene and innocuous in the sunlight. The contrast strengthens the film in several ways. It serves the practical purpose of distinguishing past and present. (One weakness of Rossif's all-black-and-white documentary about the Spanish Civil War, *To Die in Madrid*, is that one can't be sure where the archive scenes end and the specially photographed scenes begin—a doubt which tends to compromise the entire film.) Second, the transitions from pleasant color to black-and-white throw the horrors into stark relief. Most important of all, it emphasizes the remoteness of those horrors, drained as they are of the colorful detail of the postwar scenes. The contrast between black-and-white and color thus crystallizes the way in which time swiftly

<sup>20</sup> It doesn't lessen Resnais' achievement to point out that he had to use monochrome for these scenes, since none of the archive material was in color. In films it's rarely possible to distinguish between what was intentional, what was accidental and what was unavoidable; but the good director manages to work with the grain of those elements he can't control.



Claude Lelouch's *A MAN AND A WOMAN*

buries all events, no matter how terrifying or how worthy of remembrance.

The foregoing examples make it clear that when black-and-white and color are juxtaposed there is only one fundamental difference between them. Neither is necessarily more dramatic, more realistic or more sensuous. But color, being more specific, has more immediacy than black-and-white—the scenes in color appear closer in time and space. This doesn't mean that black-and-white must always represent the past when used with color. In *A Man and a Woman*, Lelouch uses black-and-white for the “present” scenes in which Jean-Louis Duroc first meets Anne Gauthier and drives her home to Paris. Then, when Anne talks about her dead husband, there are brief color inserts of her memories of them together. The point here is that Anne finds it difficult to accept Jean-Louis' love because her husband is still so alive within her, so much closer to her than the reality of his death.

Used by itself, of course, black-and-white no longer lacks immediacy. Indeed, it is a protean medium which can seem to take on nearly all the qualities of color. This adaptability is one reason why black-and-white can be used in color films with little risk of a jarring effect. But there is a much greater risk when a single-color tint or tone<sup>21</sup> is inserted into a full-color film. The stronger and more assertive the single color, the more likely it is to clash with the full-color scenes that surround it—no matter how “realistic” the tint or tone may be. For

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example, the red and blue tints in Bert Stern's *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, intended to represent sunset and nightfall, are just as jarring as the symbolic red and blue tints at the beginning of Godard's *Contempt*. On the other hand, a paler or more neutral color may be successful even when it is “unrealistic,” as in the blue-green nightmare in *The Premature Burial*. Just on the borderline are the orange-yellow-toned scenes in *A Man and a Woman* in which Jean-Louis tries to make love to Anne and she keeps remembering her husband (in full color). Though not so strong as to ruin the transitions, the tone is strong enough to make them visually irritating.

There is a subtle use of a neutral tint in Wajda's *Lotna*, in which color is reserved for the daytime scenes and sepia for the night. At first the distinction seems purely practical: monochrome requires less lighting than color, and it conveys the real-life neutralization of colors at night in a way that is almost impossible with the highly specific screen colors. But there is more to *Lotna's* use of sepia than that. The film is concerned with the experiences of a Polish cavalry regiment during the Nazi invasion of 1939, and the contrast between color and sepia reflects the contrast between the romantic traditions of the cavalry and the somber reality of mechanized warfare. The film ends at night with the death of Lotna, the regiment's prize mount, as the few surviving men scatter across a bleak landscape that looks all the more bleak for being in sepia.

When it comes to films entirely in color, the possibilities for what Eisenstein calls “arbitrary relationships within a system of images” multiply tremendously. In recent years more and

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<sup>21</sup> Tinting was achieved in earlier times by literally dipping black-and-white film in a dye. The gradations of grays thus seemed to be transformed into variations of the dye color; areas which were white in the original film took on the over-all dye color also. In toning, which is usually achieved by printing black-and-white footage on color stock with a filter interposed, the gradations of grays are replaced by varying tones of the color, and white areas remain white. Thus toning usually has a more delicate effect than tinting.



more color-film-makers have gone beyond mere decoration or disconnected effects and have attempted, for good or ill, to create a coherent color system for the film as a whole.

These attempts have as yet explored only a tiny fraction of all the possible worlds of color, and it would be ludicrous to classify them in any rigid way. Purely for convenience I have divided them into four main groups, roughly arranged in order of increasing complexity. But the groups overlap, and the differences between films within a group are often wider than those between films in different groups. These are indeed worlds of color, belonging to a universe that has still to be charted.

1. The simplest color scheme is one in which a single hue or palette dominates the entire film. At the very least such a scheme helps to give unity to the film and save it from a succession of "tasteful" harmonies. Often the dominant color is determined by the choice of a natural setting. For example, the Arctic setting of Nicholas Ray's *The Savage Innocents* establishes the unusual keynote of white: even though the use of other colors is mediocre, the film retains a visual distinction. Similarly, the Antarctic setting in which much of Delbert Mann's *Quick Before It Melts!* takes place gives a visual lift to this otherwise pedestrian comedy. Lean uses the blue-white of snow and ice as the keynote of *Doctor Zhivago*, just as he used the orange-yellows of the desert for *Lawrence of Arabia* and the yellow-greens of the jungle for *The Bridge on the River Kwai*—which partly explains why Lean's spectaculars are more impressive-looking than most.

In *The Trouble with Harry* Hitchcock adds piquancy to this kind of natural keynote by choosing a setting—Vermont in the fall—whose picturesqueness makes a sharp contrast with the macabre comedy of the action. Clément uses a similar contrast in *Purple Noon*, where an almost-perfect murder is enacted against a dazzling Mediterranean setting of white, aquamarines and oranges—colors that are carefully reflected in the interior sets as well.

In a few films it is the sets which determine the dominant color scheme: in other words, the

film-maker uses an artificial keynote. The first film I saw that attempted this was *My Uncle* (1958), in which Tati uses soft pastels for the uncle's environment and aseptic whites and tints for the modernistic house. With this limited range of pale colors Tati creates a kind of distilled reality that suits his cool fable. Unfortunately, the location scenes fail to mesh with this color scheme, in rather the same way that the comedy itself frequently slips gear from quiet subtlety to sheer boredom. A more successful use of an artificial keynote is found in Petri's *Tenth Victim*, the story of a future society in which people are licensed to hunt one another to death. Here the sets are predominantly neutral or bluish, and the location scenes are chosen and filmed in the right conditions to match. Touches of warmer colors, especially golden browns, appear in unexpected places and sometimes in unexpected combinations, as when the American "huntress" wears a shocking-pink dress in a golden decor. The mixture of the dehumanized and the casually bizarre helps to create a convincing impression of what the world *could* be like in the future.

2. Probably the commonest type of color scheme is what might be called organized realism: the coloring in each scene looks natural, but the sequences are organized to contrast with one another and form a dramatic progression.

A simple but effective example is Gilbert's *Loss of Innocence*, a romantic melodrama about English schoolgirls stranded on their own at a country inn in France. The exteriors are all airy sunlight, clear blue skies, and luminous green foliage; the interiors are keyed to warm colors—rich wooden paneling, rows of wine bottles, and close-ups of Susannah York's golden hair and Jane Asher's red hair. As the film alternates between outdoors and indoors these two complementary palettes continually enhance each other. Thus the colors take on an apparent glow that reflects the schoolgirls' glamorized view of their surroundings.

Hitchcock uses a similar basic contrast between interiors and exteriors in *Vertigo*, but he creates some striking variations. The exteriors



Hitchcock's *VERTIGO*

are in subdued greens and blues, while the interiors—such as the apartments of Scottie and Midge—are keyed to soft browns, oranges, and yellows. But for high points in the film Hitchcock intensifies the contrast by modulating to bright colors. Among the interiors, for example, there are the gleaming red walls of Ernie's restaurant where Scottie first sees Madeleine and the orange firelight in Scottie's apartment when he brings her back after her attempted "suicide" by drowning. Among the exteriors, there is the brilliant green of the lawn in front of the art museum where Madeleine goes to look at the portrait of Carlotta Valdes, her "past incarnation," and the gaudy luminous blues and greens in the redwood forest where Madeleine weaves her spell of romantic mystification around Scottie. At the climax of the film, in "Judy's" hotel room, when Scottie has finally transformed her into "Madeleine," Hitchcock turns his world of color inside out—he illuminates their embrace with the lurid green glow of the neon sign outside the window. Color

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helps elevate what might have been just a gimmicky melodrama into a haunting study of obsession and illusion.

It's hard to decide whether Antonioni's *Red Desert* is saved or compromised by its color. The notoriety of the painted grass, the wall that changes color from scene to scene, the care lavished on the release prints, and so on have tended to divert attention from the film as a whole to the color for color's sake. Certainly the color is the most meticulously planned of any film yet discussed. But despite all the artifice, the color is organized almost entirely within the bounds of naturalism; more important, it often conveys the meaning of a scene in a direct yet discreet way. (This marks an advance over Antonioni's black-and-white films, in which the visual signals tend to be either heavy-handed or obscure.) When Corrado drives Giuliana to Ferrara, the sunlit yellows and lime greens that appear in the scene suggest immediately that Giuliana is responding to Corrado's interest in her. Later, when they meet on the mooring tower out at sea, the touches of cheerful red paint again make one feel that Giuliana's neurotic fears are giving way to trust in this relationship. In both cases the signals work because they are unambiguous—being virtually the only cheerful colors that have appeared so far—and yet not so conspicuous that the viewer is forced to take conscious note of them.

These gleams of color are small-scale reflections of the film's over-all color scheme—a contrast between the somber and pallid tones of Giuliana's surroundings and the iridescence of her dream island. When she says "I am frightened of everything," one of the items on her list is colors; and throughout the film Antonioni ingeniously uses colors to represent the ebb and flow of all her fears. Thus the luminous ochers and creamy yellows of the rocks on her dream island refer back to the yellows at Ferrara, where she first began to trust Corrado; but after he betrays that trust all she can see is the poisonous yellow of the factory smoke which "the birds learn not to fly through."

Unfortunately Antonioni lavishes all this care on a boring subject. As a case history, Giuliana

is both too simple and too extreme to command deep interest, and as played (badly) by Monica Vitti she lacks any "there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I-in-this-modern-industrial-world" universality. Thus in the end the color is divorced from the film as a whole, not because it's inappropriate or decorative but because what it says so aptly is not quite worth saying.

3. The films in the first two groups are selective in their use of color, eliminating or playing down many parts of the real-life spectrum. Now come what might be called the kaleidoscopic films, which stress variety and versatility. To do this, most of them rely heavily on artificial colors as in the costumes of *Juliet of the Spirits* and the wallpaper of *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*.

In the best kaleidoscopic films, the profuse and scattered colors appear part of an organic whole. But that isn't easy to achieve. "Kaleidoscopic" is more often a euphemism for "messy," as in Losey's *Modesty Blaise*. Here, nearly every scene strives for effect at the expense of its neighbors: high-key Mediterranean exteriors clash with Op Art decor; cluttered sets overrun stylish compositions; the delicate and the garish continually stand in each other's light.

It may be argued that *Modesty Blaise* is high camp, not to be taken seriously. But that's just the trouble: the color is little fun to watch. If kaleidoscopic color is to be enjoyable, it can't be as slapdash as it may look. In Lester's *Help!*, for example, each sequence, no matter how brief or how dislocated, usually has its own palette—the whites and dark shadows of the Alps, the greens and khakis of the army maneuvers, the clear browns, whites and yellows of the pub.

Kaleidoscopic color is still harder to handle in serious films, partly because it gives them a frivolous surface. Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits*, for example, is visually well organized: rich and varied as they are, the colors enhance rather than detract from one another. But they quickly expose Fellini's tendency to bombast in presenting the bizarre and the orgiastic. Faced with this bombast in his black-and-white 8½ and *La Dolce Vita* one can just sit tight and

wait for him to move on; but in the fragmented color of *Juliet of the Spirits*, the Bishma sequence and Susy's party become vapid and irritating.

There is also a deeper trap. I'm not sure whether, at the end, Giulietta is supposed to become reconciled to her situation because she accepts reality or because she's taken refuge in her visions; but either way the ending is a letdown. The gorgeously detailed color that Fellini has accumulated in the course of stating Giulietta's problem simply overwhelms the resolution. Whereas 8½ has an equally perfunctory ending—the tacked-on circus procession—it does not seem so much of a letdown because the rest of the film has been "held in check" by black-and-white.

Nevertheless, Fellini makes excellent use of color in *Juliet of the Spirits* to show the interplay of fantasy and reality. At first the two are distinct: Giulietta's visions are somber (misty greens for the memory of grandpa, the vision of the Lord of Justice, the dream of the shadowy boat at the beach) while her real surroundings are bright and colorful. Then the visions become increasingly brighter until they merge into reality (the appearance of the child at the stake in the garden, of Susy in the bathroom). This transformation involves many subtleties. To give just one example, the shots of the orange paper flames which represent the burning at the stake are repeated more and more briefly: since one responds to color first and to form afterward, the flames seem more and more real as the shots become briefer.

The finest example of kaleidoscopic color—perhaps of any kind of color—so far is Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. Like *Juliet of the Spirits* it takes bright and artificial colors as its norm. Even the location scenes are dominated by fresh paint, posters, and colored lighting. But unlike *Juliet of the Spirits*, the colors have nothing to do with fantasy. The wallpaper, the umbrellas, and the rest provide a multicolored background for the most ordinary incidents, such as Mme. Emery's practical concerns with her store or the waiting period during Guy's absence. Life, says Demy through



*Demy's*  
UMBRELLAS  
OF  
CHERBOURG

his images, does not need “spirits” to make it tolerable; even at its most banal it has a colorful texture of wonder and of hope.<sup>22</sup> Thus the conventional Mme. Emery can bubble over with *joie de vivre* even when Geneviève is pregnant, Guy is far away, and Geneviève’s solid suitor Roland has yet to learn of her condition.

With variegated colors forming the warp and woof of his characters’ lives, Demy opens out into single colors for scenes of unusual emotion or insight. Strong colors are associated with the direct, unsophisticated Guy. The orange-painted café where he proposes to Madeleine has already been mentioned. Red and orange-red also mark out the high points of his relationship with Geneviève: the apricot-red walls of the dance hall where they first declare their love; the fire-truck-red reflection in the garage window behind them when Guy tells Geneviève he’s received his draft notice; and, in their final, accidental meeting, the traffic-light-red neon sign behind Guy’s head when Geneviève first sees him. But Demy does not try to make any rigid emblematic use of red: bright blue serves just as well for the love between Guy and

Geneviève when they go to his blue-walled room. Later, when Guy returns from Algeria to find that Geneviève is married, and he enters the room where they once loved, his pang of loss is made visible in the sudden reappearance of that blue: its unchanged vividness, when what matters most to him is changed beyond repair, comes as a slap in the eye.

For crucial scenes involving the gentle and sophisticated Roland the dominant colors tend to be neutral, either dark (like the topcoat he wears when he first meets Geneviève) or light (the summer suit he wears when he accepts Geneviève despite her pregnancy). These neutral tones do not merely stand for his dependability: the sharp contrast they make with the basic variegated texture of the film reveal his emotions to be as powerful as Guy’s though far more controlled. Thus one of the most visually striking scenes in the film is Roland’s first sight of Geneviève as she enters the jewelry store. Dressed in white beside her mother in yellow, surrounded by spacious white-framed windows through which the street is outlined in pale and airy blues, Geneviève seems almost to be floating on light.

The stages of Geneviève’s separation from Guy and her acceptance of Roland are marked out in progressively more neutral colors. Even

<sup>22</sup> The music, of course, conveys the same idea—every word is sung, whether it forms part of garage shop-talk or a declaration of love.

before Guy departs, the delirious scene in which they glide through the blue-lighted streets toward Guy's home modulates to a lurid, prophetic pallor at the very moment that he declares "I'll love you to the end of my life!" Later, when Geneviève tells her mother she can hardly remember what Guy looks like, she goes to the window of the umbrella store and looks out sadly at the carnival festivities: as the camera follows her away from the variegated colors of the store's decor, the screen is dominated by the cornflower blue of Geneviève's dress and the blurred pallid blues of the daylight scene outside. And the entire final sequence, when Guy and Geneviève have come to terms with their separate lives, is a resolution of all the film's colors into a firm and simple balance—the black of the night and the white of the snow. Tynan was completely wrong about *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*: few films have used color with such relevance from start to finish.

4. My last group consists of films which make artificial use of naturalism. This is a wide-ranging group indeed, with the deliberate grittiness of Resnais' *Muriel* at one extreme and the deliberate seductiveness of Varda's *Le Bonheur* at the other.

In between the two is Lelouch's *A Man and a Woman*, probably the most eclectic color film ever made. It dabbles in almost every color device yet tried; and Lelouch seems so preoccupied with these devices that he often lets the film slide into banality (some of the scenes between Anne and Jean-Louis) or preposterousness (many of the scenes involving Anne's late husband, the stunt man, and Jean-Louis' late wife.) Yet the artificial manner in which he films reality—there are virtually no studio scenes—often puts it in a significant perspective.

Ironically, while Anne and Jean-Louis agree that Life is more important than Art, the film demonstrates how the Annes and Jean-Louises of today convert their lives into art—or at least artifice. In several scenes the yellow headlights of Jean-Louis' car are likened to the rising sun, manufacture supplanting nature; in other scenes the viewer is unsure for a moment whether

Anne is daydreaming about her past or doing her continuity work on a colorful movie set. By systematic use of telescopic lenses and by continually zooming back from close-up to long shot, Lelouch squeezes and stretches space as if it were hot plastic; and he does the same to time with rapid cutting and lengthy holding. In many scenes, such as the nightfall sequence at Deauville, this compressing of time and space transforms a banal event into an exotic series of colored patterns.

In *Muriel* the natural colors are made not exotic but disconcerting. The patterns within many scenes, and in transitions from scene to scene, rarely gratify the eye like the black-and-white composition of *Marienbad*, for Resnais is using color to reveal a different aspect of time. His characters are all trying in various ways to come to terms with the past. In the course of the film they are forced to realize that the passing of time is not a flow like that of a river, which with heroic engineering might be reversed, but a continual shattering of the present into fragments that cannot be put together again. Resnais achieves this effect partly by his choice of colors and even more by the restless way he cuts from one to another. There are a lot of in-between shades—steely blues, beiges, umbers—and the interiors are often a quiet clutter of middle tones, with here and there a jarring bright color like Hélène's yellow kitchen. The basic color scheme is, in fact, autumnal, though it only takes on a pleasing *Trouble with Harry* aspect in the few exterior scenes by the sea. Elsewhere, by leaping to

Resnais' *MURIEL*



and fro across this palette—sometimes between day and night—Resnais neutralizes its languor in much the same way as Ernest's breathless, jerky singing of the *Déjà* song neutralizes its nostalgia. The one direct view of the film's past—the movies that Bernard shot in Algeria—are of trivial incidents that reveal nothing of the experience that affected Bernard most deeply: the torturing of the Algerian girl he calls Muriel. Resnais tints the scenes with pallid greens and ochers—like a verdigris—to make it clear that these fragments of the past can no longer be fitted into the present.

Resnais takes a risk in making his color deliberately nonsensuous, since many viewers balk at the film's gritty surface. Varda runs the opposite risk in *Le Bonheur*, since viewers may think that everything in such gorgeous color is to be taken as an ingredient of François' happiness, including his wife's suicide! Here the glowing colors reveal how intensely François lives in the present moment: he is too dazzled by *joie de vivre* to see that other people need a more solid, less colorful foundation for their lives. That's why Varda fades into colors between sequences, instead of black—to convey the invulnerability of François' present moment, his dangerously beautiful Now.

These examples suggest some of the lines along which the use of screen color is developing. There is a certain parallel here with the development of screen music, from simple echoic effects to a freer association. In music, of course, the development is easier to grasp because it is not intimately bound up with the image as color is.

Yet often the color is divorced from the image, either by the film-maker when he tries too hard to make it significant, or by the viewer when faced with an idiosyncratic use of it. Color films today are in a similar situation (though on a different plane) to the first Technicolor films of 30 years ago. Nurtured on black-and-white, the film-makers of that era were tempted by garishness, the viewers prone to see garishness where it didn't exist. Today's film-makers and viewers, nurtured on indifferent color films and those which use color only piecemeal, are not yet at ease with the concerted use of color to shape the film as a whole. But the increasing number of films that do try to use color in this way suggests that the sense of ease will come to us all before long. Meanwhile we can look forward to the consolidation of recent experiments and to many fascinating surprises.

STEPHEN FARBER

## New American Gothic

"American movies have never been worse," Pauline Kael wrote recently. Her remark seems like the final sellout. Fortunately, Miss Kael only partly believes it—unlike most of our serious critics, she continues to see and review American movies. And the slump Miss Kael sees is more universal than she suggests. Where are the great films today? *Juliet of the Spirits*, *Dr. Zhivago*, *Red Desert*, *The Soft Skin* are all, in

important ways, disappointing recent works from artists who have achieved masterpieces since 1960. Bright young talents fizzle. In *The Knack* and *Help!* Richard Lester breaks the exhilarating promise he made in *A Hard Day's Night*. Everywhere, it's a discouraging pattern.

The future of the American film, meanwhile, is intriguing, and it is unfortunate that almost the only energetic defenders of American